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ABSTRACT

To investigate the relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement in a nonmetropolitan area, data were collected from a random sample of 300 residents of one California county. The county has one daily newspaper and four weeklies. Subjects were asked if they read a newspaper once a week or more, if they subscribed to any newspapers, and the names of the papers they read or subscribed to. Next, they were asked to rate themselves on the following: interest in local issues, how informed they were on local issues, interest in local politics, how often they voted in local elections, level of community involvement, whether they volunteered in local activities, and the number of local organizations to which they belonged. Results showed that a significant share of newspaper readers were reading or subscribing to nonlocal newspapers. The findings also revealed that subscribing to a newspaper was positively related to community involvement. Type of newspaper read, however, was not significantly related to levels of community involvement. (FL)

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NEWSPAPER

NEWSPAPER USE AND COMMUNITY TIES IN A NON-METROPOLITAN AREA

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NEWSPAPER USE AND COMMUNITY TIES IN A NON-METROPOLITAN AREA

Abstract

This study examines levels of local and non-local newspaper use in a non-metropolitan area and the relationship between newspaper use and community involvement. A significant share of newspaper readers were found to be reading or subscribing to non-local newspapers in this study. This research also replicated findings that subscribing to a newspaper is positively related to community involvement. It was also found that the type of newspaper read (local or nonlocal) was not significantly related to levels of community involvement. The implications of these findings for newspaper editors are discussed.

NEWSPAPER USE AND COMMUNITY TIES IN A NON-METROPOLITAN AREA

The newspaper has generally been viewed as a valuable source of community information for a broad spectrum of the public. The news content of newspapers is thought to be especially useful to persons with strong involvement with and interest in the community and to persons who expect to remain in the community.¹ The presumably less-salient non-local news, supplied largely by national and metropolitan media, is thought to be more useful to those persons with a cosmopolitan orientation and who allegedly have only passing interest in local events and issues.²

Indeed, researchers generally have found support for the positive relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement, even when controlled for the effects of length of residence, age and home ownership.³ The general research hypothesis has been that, if local news is what attracts readers to the newspaper, then newspaper readers should tend to be most involved in the local community.

Not enough researchers have asked, however, whether the type of newspaper read (local or non-local) is related to community involvement. This question seems most important in non-metropolitan areas where local newspapers face significant competition for readership from newspapers from distant metropolitan areas.⁴ In a recent development, an additional competitor has reached some non-metropolitan areas -- "U.S.A. Today," Gannett's national newspaper.

Therefore, this research asks two questions. First, in a

replication analysis, does the positive relationship between general newspaper readership and community involvement hold true even in a non-metropolitan area where local and non-local newspapers are commonly found? Of particular concern are the effects of different methodologies in identifying newspaper readers.

Secondly, does the type of newspaper read (local or non-local) make a difference in the relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement? Readers of only local newspapers are predicted to exhibit higher levels of community involvement than readers of only non-local newspapers. Respondents who read both local and non-local newspapers are predicted to exhibit the highest levels of community involvement.

METHODOLOGY:

To investigate the relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement in a non-metropolitan area, data were collected from a random sample of 300 residents of Humboldt County, California in March, 1982. This county, 250 miles north of San Francisco, has one daily newspaper in Eureka (25,000 population) and four weekly newspapers in other communities. Due to the large area and low county population (114,000), random-digit dialing could not be used efficiently so the random sample was selected from the county telephone directory. The interviews were conducted by trained student interviewers on Monday through Thursday from 5 to 9 p.m. There was a 23 percent refusal rate.

This study uses measures of community involvement similar to those used in published studies of newspaper use and community ties.⁵ Respondents were first asked if they read a newspaper once a week or more and if they subscribed to any newspapers. They were then asked

to identify which newspapers they read or subscribed to. All respondents were then asked to rate themselves on the following: their interest in local issues, how informed they were on local issues, their interest in local politics, how often they voted in local elections, their level of community involvement, whether they volunteered in local activities, and the number of community organizations to which they belonged. Respondents were also asked whether they planned on living in the area one year or five years from now and their preferred source(s) of information on local issues. Demographic data on age, income and education were also collected.

RESULTS:

In this sample of 300 non-metropolitan area residents, 71.7 percent said they read a newspaper (daily or non-daily) at least once a week (Table 1). This is similar to newspaper readership levels (75.8 percent) found in non-metropolitan counties in Tennessee.⁶ In the United States, "Editor and Publisher" reports that nine out of 10 adults read at least one newspaper every week.⁷ Just over half (51.6 percent) of the newspapers cited were local while 36.3 percent were non-local (multiple-response item). Almost 80 percent of the non-local newspaper readership involved the two San Francisco dailies.

Half of the sample (54 percent) reported that they subscribed to a newspaper (Table 1). Eighty percent of the subscriptions were for local newspapers while 20 percent were for non-local newspapers (over half were for the two San Francisco dailies).

In the first stage of the replication analysis of the relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement in a non-metropolitan area, newspaper readership was operationalized as those respondents who reported reading a newspaper at least once a week.

As shown in Table 2, general newspaper readers did not differ significantly from non-readers in most measures of community involvement. Newspaper readers did have a higher mean score in level of community involvement ($p < .08$), were better educated ($p < .04$) and were younger ($p < .0001$) than non-readers; both groups were similar in income and expectations of living in the area one year and five years from now. Newspaper readers were also similar to non-readers in preferred source of information about local issues (Table 3).

In the second stage of the replication analysis, newspaper readership was operationalized as those respondents who reported subscribing to a newspaper. As shown in Table 4, newspaper subscribers differed significantly from non-subscribers in: higher interest in local issues ($p < .1$), being better informed on local issues ($p < .03$), higher interest in local politics ($p < .03$), higher frequency of voting in local elections ($p < .0001$), greater personal involvement in the local community ($p < .01$), higher number of community organizations to which they belonged ($p < .0009$), and higher levels of doing volunteer work in the community ($p < .01$). Newspaper subscribers were also significantly older ($p < .0001$), had higher income ($p < .001$) and were more likely to expect to be living in the area in five years ($p < .009$) than non-subscribers; both groups were similar in education. Newspaper subscribers were also much more likely than non-subscribers to cite newspapers as their preferred source of information on local issues ($p < .001$); non-subscribers were much more likely to cite interpersonal sources ($p < .001$) (Table 3).

Previous research has documented that newspaper readership is positively related to age, home ownership and length of residence. But even when the effects of age, income and education were controlled for in further analysis, newspaper subscribers still differed signifi-

stantly from non-subscribers in: higher interest in local issues ($p < .04$), being better informed on local issues ($p < .01$), higher interest in local politics ($p < .05$), higher frequency of voting in local elections ($p < .002$), and belonging to a larger number of community organizations ($p < .01$). The relationship between subscribing to a newspaper and the measure of personal involvement in the community disappeared, however.

Since length of residence was not determined in this study, the effect of whether or not a respondent expected to live in the area in five years was also controlled for. It was found that newspaper subscribers who said they expected to be living in the area in five years were much more likely than non-subscribers who expected to be living in the area in five years to be voting in local elections ($p < .001$) and belonging to community organizations ($p < .003$). Subscribers to newspapers did not differ from non-subscribers in any of the measures of community involvement among those who did not expect to live in the area in five years.

In the first test of the relationship between the type of newspaper read (local or non-local) and community involvement, readers of only local newspapers were compared to readers of only non-local newspapers. As shown in Table 5, readers of only local newspapers did not differ significantly from readers of only non-local newspapers in the measures of community involvement. Readers of local newspapers, in fact, had lower mean scores on all measures of community involvement but one (that was a tie score). Both groups were also similar in age, income, education and expectations of living in the area in one year and five years from now.

Respondents who read both local and non-local newspapers, as predicted, did have higher mean scores on the measures of community involvement than either readers of local newspapers or readers of only non-local newspapers, but these differences were not significant (Table 5). All three of these groups of newspaper readers were also similar in their preferred sources of information about local issues (Table 6). Readers of local and non-local newspapers were significantly younger than readers of local newspapers ($p < .06$) and readers of non-local newspapers ($p < .02$), but all were similar in education and income.

Continuing the test of methods of operationalizing "newspaper readers," subscribers to only local newspapers were compared to subscribers to only non-local newspapers. As shown in Table 7, subscribers to only local newspapers did rate themselves as being more informed on local issues ($p < .06$) than subscribers to only non-local newspapers, but both groups were similar in other measures of community involvement. Subscribers to non-local newspapers were significantly younger ($p < .1$) and better educated ($p < .005$) than subscribers to only local newspapers; subscribers to only local newspapers were more likely to expect to be living in the area in five years ($p < .03$).

As predicted, subscribers to both local and non-local newspapers had the highest mean scores on the measures of community involvement but only differed significantly from subscribers to only local newspapers ($p < .03$) and subscribers to only non-local newspapers ($p < .004$) in frequency of voting in local elections. Subscribers to only non-local newspapers did differ from the other two groups in preferred sources of information on local issues ($p < .05$) (Table 6). Subscribers to local and non-local newspapers also were the oldest

group of respondents and made the highest income; they also differed from subscribers to only non-local newspapers in having less education ($p < .06$).

DISCUSSION:

This analysis provides data on newspaper use in non-metropolitan areas and evidence of a positive relationship between subscribing to newspapers and community involvement.

A significant share of newspaper readers in this non-metropolitan area are either reading or subscribing to newspapers which originate in distant metropolitan areas. Many readers, in fact, read or subscribe only to non-local newspapers. As increasing numbers of non-local metropolitan and "national" newspapers become available to non-metropolitan areas, local newspaper editors may be faced with greater challenges to keep their share of readers. This challenge for audience share is, of course, just part of the changing media mix occurring in communities of all types. Further research will be necessary by newspapers to monitor their readership and to meet the needs of their readers who may be tempted to turn to alternative metropolitan or national newspapers in the future.

This research also replicated findings that subscribing to a newspaper is positively related to community involvement, but the evidence also supports the concern over the effects of operationalizing "newspaper readers." When newspaper readership was operationalized as "respondents who had read a newspaper at least once a week," little relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement was found. When newspaper readership was operationalized as "respondents who subscribe to a newspaper," however, a significant positive relationship between newspaper readership and community involvement was found, even when the effects of age, income and education were

controlled for. This evidence suggests future research into newspaper readership should seek more specific measures of the use of newspapers than just a generalized question like "do you read a newspaper at least once a week or more...."

In order to seek greater clarity as to what factors accounted for whether or not respondents subscribed to a newspaper, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted, using the following predictors of subscribing to a newspaper: age, income, education, expectation of living in the area in five years and a "community-involvement" index (developed from the six measures of community involvement described earlier). As shown in Table 8, the community-involvement index, age and income were significant predictors of subscribing to a newspaper. This evidence also supports the positive relationship between newspaper use and community involvement.

As for the question whether the type of newspaper read was related to levels of community involvement, this study found readers or subscribers to only local newspapers did not differ greatly from readers or subscribers to only non-local newspapers in levels of community involvement. Readers or subscribers to both local and non-local newspapers had the highest mean scores in the measures of community involvement but most differences were not significant. This is likely a function of readers or subscribers to both local and non-local newspapers being older and having higher incomes as well as being more settled in the area. Apparently, reading only non-local newspapers is not related to less community involvement; in fact, readers of only local newspapers tended to have the lowest mean scores on the measures of community involvement.

In order to seek greater clarity as to what factors accounted for significant variation in community involvement, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted, using the following predictors of community involvement: age, income, education, expectation of living in the area in five years and subscribing to a newspaper. As shown in Table 9, education, expectations of living in the area in five years, subscribing to a newspaper and age were significant determinants of community involvement. This evidence reinforces the role of education (which was not related to subscribing to newspapers) in community involvement, as well as the role of the newspaper.

In conclusion, newspaper subscribers are clearly an important part of the group of community residents who are actively involved. While this research cannot provide evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship between newspaper use and community involvement, it does show that readers or subscribers of only local newspapers are not much more likely than readers or subscribers to only non-local newspapers to be involved in the community. Therefore, the type of newspaper read is apparently not so important in contributing to community involvement as is the fact of subscribing to a newspaper. This research also suggests that education and expectation of living in a community in five years may be more important contributors to community involvement than newspaper use.

TABLE 1. Percentage of Respondents Who Reported Reading or Subscribing To Local and Non-local Newspapers in Humboldt County.

Read A Newspaper Once A Week Or More:

	(f)	(%)
YES	215	71.7
NO	75	25.0
	280	96.7

Type Of Newspaper Read:

LOCAL	51.6
NON-LOCAL	36.3

Subscribe To A Newspaper:

	(f)	(%)
YES	162	54.0
NO	134	44.7
	296	98.7

Type Of Newspaper Subscribed To:

LOCAL	79.2
NON-LOCAL	20.9

TABLE 2. Comparison of Newspaper Readers to Non-Readers in Levels of Community Involvement and Demographics.

VARIABLES:	Newspaper Readers (n=215)		Non-Readers (n=75)
	<u>$\bar{x}$</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>$\bar{x}$</u>
Interest in local issues	3.95	(.606)	3.89
Informed on local issues	3.46	(.919)	3.44
Interest in local politics	2.51	(.437)	2.60
Vote in local elections	3.24	(.431)	3.36
Level of community involvement	3.88	(.086)	3.53
Community organization membership	0.94	(.332)	.773
Volunteer in the community		(.691)*	
Live in the community next year		(.815)*	
Live in the community in five years		(.495)*	
Education	3.34	(.041)	2.97
Age	37.4	(.0001)	48.4
Income	16.6	(.885)	16.9

*Nominal variables; Chi-square analysis.

TABLE 3. Comparison Between Newspaper Readers and Non-Readers and Between Newspaper Subscribers and Non-Subscribers in Preferred Sources of Information on Local Issues.

SOURCE:	Newspaper Readers		Non-Readers		Newspaper Subscribers		Non-Subscribers	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Newspaper	146	33.1	55	35.4	138	46.0*	69	23.0*
Television	119	26.9	43	27.7	96	27.2	67	22.3
Radio	79	17.9	22	14.2	56	15.8	50	16.7
Interpersonal	89	20.2	33	21.3	59	16.7*	109	36.3*
Other	8	1.8	2	1.2	4	1.1	5	1.6
	<u>441</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>155</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>353</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>300</u>	<u>100.0</u>

*p < .001

TABLE 4. Comparison of Newspaper Subscribers to Non-Subscribers in Levels of Community Involvement and Demographics.

VARIABLES:	Newspaper Subscribers (n=162)		Non-Subscribers (n=134)
	<u>$\bar{x}$</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>$\bar{x}$</u>
Interest in local issues	4.06	(.009)	3.80
Informed on local issues	3.64	(.001)	3.26
Interest in local politics	2.69	(.002)	2.35
Vote in local elections	3.56	(.0001)	2.93
Level of community involvement	3.97	(.004)	3.54
Community organization membership	1.18	(.0001)	0.54
Volunteer in the community		(.014)*	
Live in the community next year		(.211)*	
Live in the community in five years		(.009)	
Education	3.29	(.714)	3.23
Age	44.8	(.0001)	34.8
Income	20.2	(.001)	14.2

*Nominal variables; Chi-square analysis

TABLE 5. Comparisons Among Readers of Local Newspapers, Readers of Non-Local Newspapers and Readers of Local and Non-Local Newspapers in Levels of Community Involvement and Demographics.

VARIABLES:	Local Newspaper Readers (n=106) <u>x</u>	Non-Local Newspaper Readers (n=61) <u>x</u>	Readers of Local and Non-Local Newspapers (n=49) <u>x</u>
Interest in local issues	<u>3.84*</u>	4.00	<u>4.12*</u>
Informed on local issues	3.40	3.50	3.54
Interest in local politics	2.46	2.46	2.69
Vote in local elections	3.18	3.27	3.35
Level of community involvement	3.74	4.00	3.93
Community organization membership	0.99	1.03	0.73
Volunteer in the community		(p < .883)**	(p < .756)**
Live in the community next year		(p < .804)**	(p < .583)**
Live in the community in five years			
Education	<u>3.17***</u>	<u>3.54***</u>	3.43
Age	<u>38.2****</u>	<u>40.0****</u>	<u>33.9****</u>
Income	16.9	16.6	16.1

*

p < .07

**

Nominal variables; Chi-square analysis.

18

p < .09

p < .06 between local and non-local; p < .02 between both and non-local.

TABLE 6. Comparisons Among Readers of Only Local Newspapers, Readers of Only Non-Local Newspapers and Readers of Local and Non-Local Newspapers and Among Subscribers Only to Local Newspapers, Subscribers to Only Non-Local Newspapers and Subscribers to Local and Non-Local Newspapers In Preferred Sources of Information on Local Issues.

SOURCE:	Readers of Local Newspapers		Readers of Non-Local Newspapers		Readers of Both Types		Subscribers to Local Newspapers		Subscribers to Non-Local Newspapers		Subscribers to Both Types	
	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)	(f)	(%)
Newspaper	64	30.4	46	36.2	37	34.9	104	41.9*	10	27.7*	21	42.0*
Television	61	29.0	32	25.2	26	24.5	67	27.0	10	27.7	17	34.0
Radio	37	17.6	19	14.9	18	16.9	39	15.7	8	22.2	7	14.0
Interpersonal	47	22.3	24	18.9	18	16.9	36	14.5	8	22.2	14	28.0
Other	1	0.4	6	4.7	1	0.9	0	0.0	2	0.8	1	2.0
	<u>210</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>127</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>106</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>248</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>100.0</u>

*p < .05

TABLE 7. Comparisons Among Subscribers to Only Local Newspapers, Subscribers to Only Non-Local Newspapers and Subscribers to Local and Non-Local Newspapers in Levels of Community Involvement and Demographics.

	Local Newspaper Subscribers	Non-Local News- paper Subscribers	Subscribers of Local and Non- Local News- papers
VARIABLES:	(n=118) <u>$\bar{x}$</u>	(n=16) <u>$\bar{x}$</u>	(n=24) <u>$\bar{x}$</u>
Interest in local issues	4.05	4.12	4.08
Informed on local issues	<u>3.66*</u>	<u>3.18*</u>	3.79
Interest in local politics	2.68	2.43	2.87
Vote in local elections	3.50	<u>3.37**</u>	<u>3.95**</u>
Level of community involvement	3.98	<u>3.50***</u>	<u>4.33***</u>
Community organization membership	1.11	1.18	1.5
Volunteer in the community		<u>P</u> (.937)****	<u>P</u> (.867)****
Live in the community next year		(.995)****	(.897)****
Live in the community in five years		(.030)****	(.408)****
Education	<u>3.18*****</u>	<u>4.25*****</u>	<u>3.37*****</u>
Age	44.9	<u>37.1*****</u>	<u>47.7*****</u>
Income	20.7	17.3	22.9

* $p < .07$

** $p < .004$

*** $p < .07$

21

****Nominal variables; Chi-square analysis.

***** $p < .05$ or better

TABLE 8. Community Involvement* As a Relative Determinant of
Subscribing to Newspapers.**

	<u>BETA</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Predictors of Subscribing to Newspapers:			
Community involvement*	.193	5.23	.023
Age	.182	5.56	.020
Income	.134	3.09	.081
Live in the community in five years	.076	0.95	.331
Education	.004	0.002	.961

*Index of community involvement formed from six measures of
community involvement.

**Shows results of stepwise regression analysis, a statistical technique
for determining the relative importance of a set of factors thought to
account for significant variation in some dependent variable (e.g.,
subscribing to newspapers).

TABLE 9. Newspaper Subscription As a Relative Determinant of Community Involvement.* **

Predictors of Community Involvement*:	<u>BETA</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Education	.341	23.89	.000
Live in the community in five years	.195	7.45	.007
Subscribe to newspapers	.165	5.23	.023
Age	.156	4.77	.086
Income	.114	2.62	.107

*Index of community involvement formed from six measures of community involvement.

** Shows results of stepwise regression analysis, a statistical technique for determining the relative importance of a set of factors thought to account for significant variation in some dependent variable (e.g., community involvement).

FOOTNOTES:

1 Robert L. Stevenson, "Newspaper Readership and Community Ties," A.N.P.A. News Research Report No. 18, March 9, 1979.

2 Eugene F. Shaw and Daniel Riffe, "Newspaper Reading in Two Towns," Journalism Quarterly 56: 477-487, 512 (Autumn, 1979).

3 Keith R. Stamm and Lisa Fortini-Campbell, "Community Ties and Newspaper Use," A.N.P.A. News Research Report No. 33, Oct. 30, 1981.

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6 Lynn, op. cit.

7 Editor & Publisher, March 5, 1983, p. 4.

8 Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, op. cit.